Using Software to Do More with Less

by Mark Mahoney

Prior to the onset of our recent economic challenges, consumers were already demanding more for their money and competition practically determined price points for you. After the economic downturn, it became difficult for many to just stay out of the red, much less to actually grow.

How is it possible to get ahead in this game — considering the demands and limitations that directors face?

The answer is software.

Software enables you to do more at a lower operating cost and use your 'people resources' where they are most valuable.

While that sounds simple, there are a few points that you need to be aware of before investing *any* of your time or money in software.

Look for software that:

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■ **Automates** repetitive and people-intensive processes.

■ Keeps all of your information in one **database** so that all of your features, including your automated processes, have access to it.

■ Is **web-based** so you and your staff can access information, even when you're not in the office.

■ Provides a **portal** to enable self-service for parents in updating their own information as it changes, in researching program options and registering on their own, and in checking and paying their balances — without intervention from you or your staff.

These characteristics are found in some of the business management software solutions offered today. Dig deeply into each solution you are considering to ensure that you will be able to fully maximize your business operations with the software you choose.

Let's dig into each of the areas noted in our points above.

Automated features give you the power to improve the way your business operates.

Automation can transform your operations into efficient, low error-producing processes that require little to no attention from you or your staff. Several business areas can benefit from automation. Let's focus on billing, registration, and email.

■ **Automation in Billing**

Automated billing will probably have the most visible and consistent impact on your operations. Software can easily perform recurring billing, auto-pay, and invoicing processes after initial data is entered one time. Your responsibility in the process may be only triggering the event once per billing cycle — or you may be able to set a schedule so that the process triggers itself. The days of processing credit cards one at a time via the phone can be left behind! You can even get software that sends credit card decline alerts to your email inbox.

■ **Automation in Registration**

Registration can be automated so that upon registering, student (child) data automatically goes into a database and never has to be entered again. The process works the same way, whether registration occurs online or from a kiosk or laptop in your facility. An email alerts

you, as the program administrator, that a new student has registered/enrolled. Automation of registration eliminates errors in keying student, family, and payment information and is a tremendous time-saver for staff and families, since the process becomes a self-service one that is conducted by parents at a time and in a place that is convenient for them.

■ **Automation in Attendance Tracking**

With today's software, child care organizations can make the previously arduous and paper-intensive process of taking attendance much easier. Some systems include a time-clock feature that puts automation to work for administrators so that taking attendance is more accurate, less work, and paperless. This task alone consumes the time and energies of administrators on a daily basis so streamlining it gives valuable time back to staff that can be focused on classes, students, and families.

■ **Automation in Email**

Automated emails make it possible for owners to communicate with existing clients and to market to prospects without dedicating many hours to the effort. The resulting email 'distributions' present you in a professional and organized manner. Editing tools make these systems easy for even non-techie users to create their own emails. Delivery can be targeted to certain segments of your complete list so that information can be pushed out to students and parents, teachers, and support staff with minimal effort.

■ **Database-driven Software is a Must**

Database-driven software stores all of your information (or data) in a single source that feeds all of your software features. All users, regardless of where they are logged in, have access to up-to-date information without the need to sync computers or files. This is an error-eliminator and time-saver. Once data is entered, it never needs to be entered again. This also means that changes — such as new addresses and phone numbers — are made only once in the database.

Web-based Software Gives You a Platform for the Future.

Because of today's mobile workforce, busy schedules, and Internet popularity, web-based solutions are an absolute must for operating businesses in a cost- and time-efficient manner. Web-based software gives you access to your data even when you're not in your office, and allows you to get better protection and maintenance of your software than you could afford to provide for yourself.

With web-based software, you and your staff can be more knowledgeable and provide better service because answers are easily found. As a program administrator, you can look across your business data for key performance indicators, such as enrollment and income figures, and see your daily business status — at a glance.

A web-based solution enables you to benefit from Fortune 500-level security and maintenance to your software because you are part of a large, powerful group of customers. You are also protected from losing data if you have a computer disaster in your office, because your data is stored in a safe and secure, redundant facility that is monitored, maintained, and managed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

A web-based platform also gives the software service provider the ability to more easily partner with services that can integrate into your business and enrollment management functions to extend capabilities into very specific business areas, such as accounting and email marketing software services (i.e., QuickBooks and Constant Contact), and into industry-specific solutions (i.e., OneCallNow and SafeSave Payments). By working as teams, software providers can create seamless solutions that eliminate the time-consuming confusion and complexities of using multiple programs to operate the mechanics of your business.

Finally, a web-based solution enables you to provide online services, such as registration, directly on your website or through a portal, enabling time-consuming tasks for staff to transition into self-service features.

■ **A Portal is a Wonderful Thing.**

Through your portal, you can provide information to customers as a group or individually. Because parents can log in to a secure area, they can manage their own accounts, turning much of your staff's involvement with customer data into a self-serve process. Parents are thrilled with the convenience of their access and the control it gives them over their own information. You like it because this takes the maintenance of family accounts off your hands!

How Much of an Impact Can Business Management Software Actually Have?

From my own experiences, I know:

■ organizations that have eliminated the need for one or more new hires by implementing good business management software. As owners and managers, you know the myriad expenses and risks that come with each new hire.

■ single location schools that have been able to open second locations without increasing staff because they implemented business management software.

■ schools that have been able to double and triple their program capacity, improve staff:child ratio, and increase the number of programs offered and depth of curriculum because of their business management software.

■ organizations that have made complete financial turnarounds by streamlining their operations with business management software.

Get Back to the 'People' Part of Your Business

When you make the investment in business management software, you bring in the tools that enable you to do more administrative work using fewer staff hours. You provide yourself and your staff with the opportunity to be more involved with the 'people' part of your business instead of the operation of it.

Monotonous, repetitive, data intensive administrative and operational tasks are better served with technology. Software practically removes human error from the equation, and you and your staff are given the gift of time — which is a rare commodity — to spend with children and families. As a result, you are able to take on marketing, customer service, and program and curriculum initiatives that will help you attract more families and grow your business.

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